FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Life that Really is Life
October 15, 2000

John M. Buchanan

"When we consider that our time and our talent are the greatest gifts that we have, we understand them rightly to be our treasure, that precious cargo we are privileged to bear in this world. . . . We will be judged not on how much we have . . . but on how wisely and well we use the time that we have. God has great expectations; so too must we."

Peter Gomes

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

1 Timothy 6:11-19
Mark 10:17-31

"Do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, . . . take hold of the life that really is life."
1 Timothy 6:18, 19 (NRSV)

Dear God, we have so very much and we hold onto it so very tightly. Open our hearts and hands this morning with the promise of a love in which we are forever safe, a love we cannot earn or save or hoard—a love we can only accept and then give away. Startle us, O God, and help us live faithfully, generously, the life that really is life, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Brigadier General Mark Welsh, Commandant of Cadets at the United States Air Force Academy, spoke to the Corps of Cadets at the beginning of the school year last August. General Welsh was a squadron leader during the Gulf War. His speech, illustrated, with slides, was fascinating, inspiring and, at times, deeply personal, almost spiritual. He told about exhilaration—and fear, and how issues of life and death are never far away, a tragic reminder of which we all experienced this week as we thought about young American sailors, in peacestime, killed in the Gulf of Aden. General Welsh told about Mike Chinberg, who had been married just two weeks and who made a small miscalculation on a training flight and flew his F-16 into the ground at 700 miles an hour. He told about telephoning Mike Chinberg's wife of two weeks and his parents.

And then he became a kind of pastor to the cadets, telling a vignette that reminded me of the story of Jesus and the wealthy young man who wondered what he had to do to inherit eternal life. On the night before the first actual combat mission was scheduled, General Welsh, remembering Mike Chinberg, ended the briefing by telling his men to go to their rooms and to write a letter to their families. "Say what you want to say if you never have a chance to say it again. . . . I told them they didn't get to fly until I got that letter."

Afterward, Welsh's own commanding officer said, "By the way, you can give me your letter in the morning, too." And then Welsh told the gathered audience of bright, strong, well-educated, privileged young men and women about it.

"If you haven't had the pleasure of sitting down and thinking about your family, . . . if you haven't tried to tell your children that you're sorry you won't be there to see their next ballet recital or baseball game, . . . if you haven't had the pleasure of telling your parents how important they were to you—or tried to tell your spouse how the sun rises and sets in her eyes—then you haven't lived."

Until you've taken inventory, until you've identified and expressed your deepest love, until you've given deeply of yourself, you haven't lived. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" a young man asked Jesus one time. A little later St. Paul slightly rephrased the question in the form of a moral imperative: "Fight the good fight of the of faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called. . . . Do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, . . .take hold of the life that really is life."

The issue here is not only life after death. When the Bible—when Jesus—talks about eternal life, it means life now, in the present, life that is not threatened by death, life that transcends death, overcomes death, conquers death. It is full life, life as it is meant to be, life—in St. Paul's memorable phrase—that really is life.

That's what the young man in the Mark text wants and does not have. That's what General Welsh was getting at by telling the young, privileged Air Force cadets that they must never miss the truly important events and people and relationships in life, must always, every day, love and therefore live fully, without reservation.

I love this young man. Isn't it interesting that the Bible sometimes acts as a mirror, throwing back at us reflections of ourselves or of our culture. This young man could be "dressed up and re-presented as a product of American culture and American mainline religion" (Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching, Year B).* Put him or her in a business suit, Brooks Brothers, Mark Shale, Coach briefcase, latest Noikia in pocket or hand, hard working, sincere, traditional, living a good life, seeking, searching, and you have a visitor at Fourth Presbyterian Church on Sunday morning.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks, "the life that really is life?" "You know the commandments," Jesus responds. "I keep them all," the young man answers. "Well then, you lack one thing," Jesus says to him. "Sell what you own, give the money to the poor and come follow me." The young man, Mark reports, went away grieving, for he had many possessions. He had a lot of stuff and he loved his stuff, all of it.

Now you might conclude at this point, and particularly when Jesus tells his disciples that it will be very difficult for a wealthy person to get into the kingdom—as difficult as squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle—you might conclude that this formula is simple and universal: no wealth allowed. Sell it all. Become poor.

But the text won't allow it. You have to read on. The disciples—totally perplexed by this, as they have been taught all their lives that riches are a sign of God's blessing—the disciples ask—"Who then can be saved?" Peter asks, "What about us? We've left everything behind. Are we in?" And Jesus' enigmatic answer: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God: for God all things are possible."

That is to say, it's the wrong question—What must I do? You can't do anything. The young man's problem was not his wealth; it was his relationship to his wealth. Ironically, he didn't really own it, it owned him. Right on cue, the *New York Times Magazine* this morning features a series of articles on the topic of "Spending: How Americans Part with Their Money." It was too close for this sermon, but I know it will show up in a thousand

stewardship homilies in the next few weeks. Flipping through it, I did see a picture of Leland Pittman sitting on his new John Deere mower and the caption: 'When Leland lays down his credit card, he does so with no quiet budget calculations but with urgent prayers "to the good Lord that it will be OK." . . . If a man wasn't meant to own an item, he can count on the Lord to torpedo the loan application. If this happens, Leland believes the Lord is saying: 'Wait a while. You might get something better.'" (*New York Times Magazine*, 10/15/00, p.68). The young man in the story couldn't give away his possessions. He was trapped, enslaved by his commitment to the notion that he was in charge—even of his own salvation. The issue here is not wealth, but the man's relationship to it, his responsible use of what he had, his freedom to live the life that really is life.

Writing instructions to his young disciple, Timothy, Paul addresses the matter directly: "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, . . . so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

It is the wrong question—"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer the young man gets from Jesus is "Nothing—but your wealth is keeping you from realizing that." The real question is how shall you live—authentically, fully, deeply, passionately—how shall you live the life that really is life? For this young man, his possessions—his stuff—his wealth, was preventing him from doing that.

And so for each of us, the question is, what prevents us from knowing that our salvation is in God's hands and that we are free to love and live fully, generously, joyfully—the life that really is life?

Richard Bode has written a wonderful book, *First You Have to Row a Little Boat.* Bode is an avid sailor, and he uses sailing as a metaphor for living. I turned to the book recently when two friends died, both of them too soon. Both taught me an important lesson: that the gift of life is precious and that the issue is always living it fully and passionately and faithfully. I remembered something Bode said. He recalled a close call, a reminder that he wasn't always in control of his life, that things happen on the ocean, or in a storm, or in life, that are out of our control:

> **"The prime virtue of my blue sloop was that it compelled me to live in the present and to avoid too much unhealthy speculation about what might happen at some indefinite point ahead which I couldn't plainly see. For the truth is that I already know as much about my fate as I need to know. The day will come when I will die. So the only matter of consequence before me is what I will do with my allotted time. I can remain on shore, paralyzed by fear, or I can raise my sails and dip and soar in the breeze." (p. 94)**

The good news was that the young man's eternal salvation was in the hands of a God for whom all things are possible, a God of love and kindness and forgiveness, a God whose justice is also mercy. The great tragedy was that he didn't know that, didn't trust that, didn't live in the glorious freedom that good news bestows, couldn't give it away, couldn't

be generous, couldn't share. He had not heard or experienced the unconditional love of God—standing right in front of him in Jesus Christ.

There's a wonderful short story by the distinguished writer, Carol Bly, *After the Baptism.* She describes a baptism in a suburban Episcopal Church and the party that follows. There is not much authenticity or passion about any of it. It's all superficially, socially proper, vapid. About the sacrament she says, "People may get a kick out of the rhetoric, but that doesn't mean they believe it." About their lives and homes, Bly says, "No one could imagine a passion happening in their houses—not even a mild midlife crisis. Not even a hobby, past an assembled kit."' At the party, with lobster and ample champagne, tensions emerge. The partygoers drink a little too much—something happens that isn't supposed to happen. They start to talk about their experience of the baptism. One of them—Molly, for whom the infant is named and who has just lost her husband—talks about their life and their great love, goes into embarrassing detail about his illness and his death. She stuns the party—and this is Bly's point—the Biblical point:

"This morning, in church, I was daydreaming about him again. I was not going to mention it. . . . So when you took that palm oil," she finished, glancing across at Father Geoffrey, "and pronounced our little Molly here safe—safe!—in our Lord Jesus Christ forever . . . well, I simply began to cry!"

And Bly comments: "In the normal course of things, such a speech would simply bring a family celebration to an absolute stop. People would sit frozen still as a crystal for a moment, and then one or another would say, in a forced, light-toned way, 'My word, but it's getting late . . .'" Likewise the young man who had the chance to know and embrace and live his salvation, the life that is really life, went away grieving.

The issue on Stewardship Sunday—in this church or any church—is money that translates into ministry and service and witness in the world. But beneath it, on Stewardship Sunday and on every day of our lives, is the issue of how to live fully and authentically and passionately. The issue is that God has loved us into this life, into our particular and individual lives, has loved us unconditionally in Jesus Christ his Son, that little Molly is safe, that in the startling promise we hear every time we baptize—"Eleanor, David, Theodore, you belong to Jesus Christ forever"—that our ultimate destiny, the summation of our lives is in the hands of a God for whom all things are possible. And so the question is how to live out that good news.

General Welsh reminded his young students to love and to express their love.

Richard Bode proposes to live in the present, to set your sails and launch into life.

St. Paul wrote, "Do good, be rich in good works, generous, ready to share—take hold of the life that is really life."

And Jesus, the Christ, our Lord beckoned, "Come, follow me."

Amen.